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Buckley key to deal

Freeing hostages the motive, senators hear

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WASHINGTON—Testimony by CIA Director William Casey and former national security adviser Robert McFarlane has convinced senators the real motive for the sale of arms to Iran was to free American hostages, not to improve relations with Iran as President Reagan has claimed.

The primary focus was to free William Buckley, the CIA station chief in Beirut, who was kidnapped by the Islamic Jihad (Holy War) group March 16, 1984, and who is presumed dead.

"If Buckley had not been a hostage, and if we did not have reports that he was being brutally tortured, there would have been no deal," said one source, who has heard most of the closed-door testimony to the Senate intelligence panel.

"The whole idea of 'opening lines of communication' with Iranian moderates added a convenient patina to a policy that was clearly aimed at paying ransom to retrieve hostages," the source said. "The CIA was desperate to get him out and Casey made the President desperate to get him out."

"He (Buckley) knew everything," Casey has said, the source added, "and that was the basis of our negotiating policy—to free him, save his life and keep vital national security information out of the hands of his torturers."

"It is clear to me that the humanitarian motive to win the freedom of the hostages was the paramount motive," said Sen. Frank Murkowski (R-Alaska), after hearing Casey's testimony.

Sources close to the Senate probe say Casey confirmed reports that the agency undertook extraordinary measures to win Buckley's release—paying a "small fortune" on informants, intercepting communications and enhancing satellite photographs in hope of determining where he was held.

Another source said CIA authorities felt they had enough "circumstantial" evidence at least once during the crisis to know where Buckley and some of the other hostages were and there was serious consideration of a rescue mission.

Right after the rescue planning began, new evidence emerged contradicting the previous sources and the effort was scrapped because it was deemed too dangerous. Another reason the effort was dropped, sources said, was that Casey and others believed the hostages were separated and a rescue attempt—even one to free some of the hostages—would have endangered the lives of the others.

Iranian negotiators were aware that Buckley was the main interest of the Reagan administration because he was the CIA's expert on anti-terrorist policy in the Middle East and perhaps its most important officer in the region.

Tortured to death

The Iranians cynically played along with the negotiations for anti-tank missiles even though Buckley had probably been tortured to death in June 1985 before the serious bargaining began.

Administration officials were told Buckley would be released first and it was on that basis that Reagan reportedly authorized the first arms deal for 500 anti-tank missiles.

Newsweek reported yesterday that the first installment of the ransom, 100 of the missiles, was delivered to Iran in early September 1985. But the Iranian middleman, Manucher Ghorbanifar, was furious that it was only a partial shipment.

"We agreed to 500 ... and you only sent 100—do you want the Iranians to send Buckley's arm or leg on account?" Ghorbanifar reportedly yelled.

The remaining 400 were shipped by Sept. 14.

The Shiite kidnapers released the Rev. Benjamin Weir instead of Buckley and administration figures soon became convinced after hearing Weir's account of the torture of Buckley that the CIA official had died of his wounds and medical neglect.

The President has repeatedly insisted he paid no ransom for the freed American hostages.

But administration figures have painted a picture of a President in agony over the plight of the six Americans held in Lebanon and deeply pained over the criticism of the hostage families that he was not doing enough to free their loved ones.